

DEPARTMENTAL REGULATION		Number: 3090-001
SUBJECT: Vital Records Program	DATE: July 17, 1986	
	OPI: Information Management Division, Office of Information Resources Management	

1 PURPOSE

This regulation outlines responsibilities and procedures for identifying and maintaining USDA vital records. It augments information in DR 1800-1, Departmental Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities, and DM 1800-1, USDA National Emergency Preparedness Instructions.

2 POLICY

a Each USDA agency is responsible for establishing a vital records program in accordance with this regulation and DR 1800-1 and DM 1800-1.

b Each USDA agency is responsible for selecting and safeguarding those records which would be required to ensure the continuity of essential USDA functions during and following a national emergency.

3 REFERENCES

a DR 1800-1, Departmental Emergency Preparedness Responsibilities, September 9, 1983;

b DM 1800-1, USDA National Emergency Preparedness Instructions, September 27, 1983;

c DM 3140-1, ADP Security Manual, July 19, 1984;

d Records Management Handbook "Federal Archives and Records Centers";

e NARS Self-Inspection Guide for Federal Agencies
"Evaluating a Vital Records Program"; and

f 36 CFR 1236, Vital Records.

4 DEFINITIONS

a Agency. USDA Agencies and staff offices.

b Vital Records. Records which are necessary to ensure the continuity of Government activities during and following a national emergency or a technological or natural disaster such as a fire or flood. Vital records consist of two basic categories: "emergency operating records" and "rights and interests records." The term vital records is synonymous with such terms as "essential records," "emergency preparedness records," "indispensable records," and "relocation records."

c Emergency Operating Records. Records which are necessary for continuing the essential uninterruptible functions of the Federal Government for the duration of a national security emergency. Emergency operating records are commonly referred to as "category A" records in emergency planning nomenclature. These records are required by top and intermediate level officials at alternate essential uninterruptible functions. These records should be in paper form so they can be used without reliance on mechanical or electronic equipment. Their selection, shipment, maintenance, and disposition are the responsibility of designated officials in cooperation with the Emergency Preparedness Staff, Office of Personnel. See DR 1800-1.

d Rights and Interests Records. Records which are essential to the protection of the legal rights and interests of individuals and the U.S. Government. Rights and interests of records include Federal employees payroll and leave records, insurance records, and valuable research records. They also contain information on proceedings and decisions. Within USDA, they are commonly referred to as "category B" records. These records are not needed immediately following an emergency, storage points do not have to be at or in the vicinity of emergency operating facilities, and the records do not have to be solely in paper form. They can therefore be stored at any of the Federal records centers or other similar depositories.

5 RESPONSIBILITIES

Agencies will:

a Establish and maintain a vital records program that is simple, concise, and avoids complex and difficult procedures whenever possible;

b Use sound judgment in identifying and selecting those records essential to agencywide effectiveness during and after an emergency. This includes selecting the appropriate media for storing records;

c Ensure that their vital records are protected against damage and loss; and

d Ensure that records selected for inclusion in the vital records program are current, complete, protected, and available to facilitate the continuity of USDA operations during and after an emergency.

6 WHICH RECORDS ARE VITAL

Designation of vital records is a discretionary decision based on the agency mission, emergency functions, and emergency plans of operations. Records which are normally considered vital include:

a Statements of agency missions in an emergency;

b Delegations of authority and successions to command;

c Regulations or announcements to be issued immediately at the beginning or end of an emergency;

d Lists of employees assigned emergency duties;

e Information concerning the whereabouts of vital records; and

f Information about agency personnel, property, damage, and assessment data. Fiscal records such as periodic summaries of financial status and records of monies received by and owed to the Government should also be safeguarded. At the many industrial establishments operated by the Federal Government, records reflecting the engineers' drawings, explanations of complex industrial processes, and lists of suppliers for items and materials not readily available should be included in the vital records program. Rights and interests records are not vital records unless the agency is the statutory office of record.

7 PROGRAM ELEMENTS

a Practicality of the Program. A formal vital records program, reflecting top management support, is needed within each agency in USDA. The program should be designed to meet the agency in emergency needs within budgetary limitations. The cost and complexity of ensuring the availability of every document that might conceivably be needed in an emergency would be prohibitive.

Therefore, only those needed during and after an emergency should be selected. In selecting these records, agencies also need to keep in mind that the individuals using these records during an emergency may not be the same people who normally use them. It is particularly important that the program be kept on a practical basis because:

(1) It is essential part of the emergency preparedness program designed to ensure the continuity of Government under the most adverse circumstances. Overall preparedness may suffer to the extent that necessary information is not available when it is most needed; and

(2) This program must be kept current for an indefinite period of time. If it is overly elaborate, cumbersome, or costly, inevitably it will not be kept current. The procedures for ensuring that vital records will be available must be made routine.

b Providing Copies of Vital Records. Vital records, subject to section 4c and d, will normally be maintained as duplicate copies of the original records in paper, microform, or machine-readable form, whichever is most appropriate. These copies can be stored at designated alternate emergency relocation facilities or other designated locations depending upon the size and volume of the records, the frequency with which records need to be updated, the costs involved, and any security precautions which must be applied.

(1) Existing Duplicates at Other Locations. These copies may be already in files at separate locations within USDA to which agency officials have access in time of emergency.

(2) Duplicates Created for Storage at Alternate Locations. These duplicates are created specifically for storage at vital records locations. Copies are prepared simultaneously with the original and other records in regular day-to-day operations and are transferred to emergency storage in accordance with approved shipping schedules.

(3) Reproduction of Copies of Existing Records. Duplicates are made of existing records, either because no extra copies are available or because the nature of the record makes it difficult to create multiple copies. Duplicates are made by various methods depending on the quantity of records to be copied and the nature of the records.

(a)
Paper. Office copiers can be used to reproduce copies.

(b)

Microfilm Copies. If funds permit, the use of microfilm is an excellent method of copying vital records because the process is quick and eliminates many storage problems associated with paper or magnetic media. Microfilming vital records will be guided by the policies, procedures, responsibilities, and standards outlined in Departmental Regulation 3070-1, Micrographics Management.

NOTE: There are, however, some disadvantages to microfilming vital records, including the following:

- (1) While computer-output microfilm can be economical, actual microfilming can be more costly than providing an extra paper copy at the time the record is created;
- (2) In an emergency, there might be difficulty in providing necessary readers or reader printers; and
- (3) As long as the images are on a single reel of microfilm or a fiche, only one person can use the reel/fiche at one time.

(c) Machine-Readable

Records. The growth of automatic data processing systems has made it necessary to safeguard quantities of magnetic media used for information storage. If vital records are maintained on magnetic media, a copy of the program manual or other information required to use the records should be stored with them. Because of the fragile nature of information stored on magnetic media, agencies must ensure that magnetic media stored at vital records locations are protected against loss of valuable information. Such protection should consist of periodic recalls and inspections of these records. Information stored on magnetic media may have to be replaced, recopied, or in other ways restored if the inspection results in the detection of an unacceptable number of errors or if the equipment the records were originally created on changes. The major disadvantage of storing vital records in machine-readable form is that the equipment needed to access the information may not be available or may not be in working order in emergency situations. DM 3140-1 ADP Security Manual, contains guidance on electronic record backup and on contingency planning. Contingency plans must provide for emergency processing at an alternate site and assure that needed records are available.

c Indexing Records. As records are duplicated, they should be indexed properly to ensure easy accessibility to specific information. Time is a crucial factor in reconstructing a data base or a system of records that has been damaged or destroyed by a disaster. Therefore, regular systematic indexing of all stored information is a necessity.

8 STORAGE

a Selecting a Storage Site. In choosing an off-site storage location, do not pick one too close to your office or building. If duplicate records are stored too close, the same disaster that affects the original records may also destroy the duplicate records.

b Rights and Interest Records. The facilities of all Federal records centers, regardless of geographic location, are available for agencies desiring to store their rights and interest records. In addition to storage space for paper records, each Federal records center (except the Mechanicsburg FRC) has environmentally controlled space suitable for the storage of vital records on magnetic tape and photographic film.

c Emergency Operating Records. Emergency operating records should be handled in accordance with the agency's internal emergency preparedness programs and forwarded to the alternate emergency operating facilities.

d Rotation of Records. All vital records, whether rights and interest or emergency operating records, must be periodically updated to insure that they remain current, complete, and accessible.